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Becoming a Preferred Employer

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To attract high-caliber employees who are loyal to your business, follow this advice from a human resources expert.

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Achieving business success is a goal that goes well beyond analyzing spreadsheets to an entrepreneur's ability to appreciate the crucial role employees play in that quest. The best business idea in the world is worthless without the right people to help us create, improve, protect and deliver the services and products we depend on for our livelihoods. And to attract and retain high caliber staff, you need to be viewed as a preferred employer.

So what distinguishes a company as a preferred employer, and how does an organization earn that label?

One definition is that preferred employers are companies where people are so engaged in their jobs that they're not interested in pursuing other opportunities. Being such a destination workplace changes the success equation for small businesses because a company is better able to uncover and capitalize on more opportunities when it's strategic and systematic in the role its employees play in the business.

Becoming a preferred employer involves more than learning the characteristics of such an organization, however—it also requires that you understand what top performers want and value in a relationship with an employer. Interestingly, the answers to both questions are the same.

To begin with, top-tier employers offer more than competitive pay and benefits. In fact, the word "competitive" implies that you're simply matching what many other businesses are providing. Even important additional elements, such as a good environment and open communication, won't necessarily make the difference.

Studies show that the most important factor is how people feel about their role in the business. Employees perform at different levels based on how they're engaged in the lifeblood activities of the company. When an employer brings in people who are talented, aligned with the company's values and focused on its goals, the results can be tremendous.

Want to set your company apart from your competitors? Here are some steps that can help you draw the best people to your business:

- **Make sure your employees know they're important.** Your staff needs to know they play a vital role in your company's success. Remind them that your business couldn't achieve its goals without them doing what they do every day.
- **Encourage loyalty through appreciation.** That feeling comes when an employer shows gratitude. Giving credit for extra effort sounds like a little thing, but demonstrating appreciation for discretionary effort motivates people to continue performing at high levels.
- **Provide your staff with the support and resources they need to achieve their goals.** Ask your employees, "Do you have what you need to get the job done? What else can we do to make your job better?" A business owner's role is to provide support by bringing people together and supplying them with the tools and resources to get their jobs done well.
- **Make people feel rewarded in a way that goes beyond compensation and benefits.** Top performers look forward to being given challenging, significant assignments. It's essential if you're going to keep them motivated and on board.
- **Understand the crucial importance of giving credit and accepting blame.** If a company

achieves its objectives, it's because its employees performed well. If the goal is missed, it's often because the leader didn't align employees with the objectives, didn't equip them properly, or didn't provide the resources necessary for them to get the job done.

- **Help your employees achieve a sense of accomplishment.** Communicate the importance of what your workers have achieved so they know they're making a difference. Unlike a large corporation where people often can't see the direct results of their daily efforts, you can more easily let people know what their efforts mean to the success of your company.

The past few years have been a challenging time—the bursting of the dot-com/technology bubble, the tragic events of September 11, the war against terrorism, and the effort to work through the economic downturn.

But these hurdles have served to highlight the crucial leadership role business owners play in our communities and in our national economy. We've seen business leaders dust themselves off, rally their people to pick up the pieces, and get going again. That's true leadership. And you can become a true leader, too. You can create a company that's the best in your field—an organization to which top performers gravitate. You can become a preferred employer in the 21st century.

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